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Volume III, number 3, of "The Murrelet", mimeographed "Official Bulletin of the Pacific Northwest Bird and Mammal Club", reached us November 10. The editor, Mr. F. S. Hall of the Washington State Museum, Seattle, is to be congratulated upon the success of his efforts to produce a creditable journal with small resources. This issue contains several articles and notes on birds, valuable at least from a local standpoint, under the authorship of J. Hooper Bowles, S. F. Rathbun, Kenneth Racey, Walter F. Burton, C. de B. Green, E. A. Kitchin, and others.

The Chicago meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, held October 23 to 26, was well attended. More than forty papers were read. Elections included Dr. Arthur A. Allen to the class of Fellows, and D. R. Dickey, A. O. Gross, W. Huber, T. I. Storer and J. T. Zimmer to the class of Members.

Mr. M. P. Skinner, Yellowstone Park, Wyoming, is contemplating early publication of his book on the "Birds of the Yellowstone". Readers of THE CONDOR are already familiar with the type of literature produced by Mr. Skinner. He is an accurate observer and good writer, and his book, we predict, will constitute a worthy contribution to western ornithology.

Mr. Howard H. Cleaves, formerly with the San Diego Natural History Museum, is now located at Clarksburg, West Virginia, where he is serving as state secretary for the Wild Life League of West Virginia. The object of this society is to spread the conservation-of-game idea in a state where conservation is badly needed.

It is our conviction that the best piece of conservation legislation proposed for a long time is just now pending before Congress. This is Senate bill 1452 (H. R. 5823), which bill provides for the establishment of game refuges and properly regulated public shooting grounds. Its provisions would be carried out under the auspices of the United States Bureau of Biological Survey, and this would mean its administration upon a logical, scientific basis. We recommend that Cooper Club members support this bill by expressing their approval of it to their legislative representatives in Washington. The bill is likely to be brought up for final action early in the new session of Congress.

Mr. Edgar Chance, a British ornithologist, is the author of a late book entitled "The Cuckoo's Secret" (London, Sedgwick and Jackson), in which the egg-laying habits of the European Cuckoo are described and illustrated from photographs in great detail. A moot point has long been as to whether the bird lays its egg directly into the nest of the victim, or deposits its egg elsewhere and places said egg by the way of its beak into the foster nest. Mr. Chance is so sure of the correctness of his own conclusions, which are of the former import, that he has issued a "challenge" involving a wager of 500 pounds with anyone who wishes to set out to prove the contrary. Thus he hopes to stimulate further careful and scientific enquiry into "the cuckoo's secret". And at the same time the Englishman's love of sport will come into play!

Professor Lynds Jones, head of the Ecology department at Oberlin College, conducted a party of eleven students, via "Fords", from Ohio to California the past summer. The enterprising members of the party thus had the advantage of an ideally practical course in geographical distribution.

## COMMUNICATIONS

### THE PRESENT STATUS OF THE SUBSPECIES

To the Editor of The Condor:

In these days when ornithological nomenclature and taxonomy seem to have become of more importance than the birds themselves, the primary or, indeed, the sole object of our system is not to be lost sight of. A scientific name, once it is bestowed, is after all only an assembly of two or three words so grouped as to convey an idea of the approximate perch height of the lucky or unlucky recipient in the genealogical tree; or, to put it differently, a statement of the evolutionary progress made by the particular group or individual in question, down to the year A. D. 1922, or whenever the baptism took place. Now, it seems to me that the fact that a certain horned lark's back, or a certain fox sparrow's bill is different from the backs or the bills of horned larks or fox sparrows occupying other areas is distinctly secondary to the fact that separate geographic situations have caused certain changes to take place. Unfortunately, our only way of expressing what has happened is in terms of millimeters or of color, or by some other equally unsatisfactory designation. These means of describing what changes have occurred

are undoubtedly what have given most people a wrong conception of systematic work in general, and of the so-called "subspecific" races in particular. If the rank and file of bird students would put aside the idea that "microscopic" subdivisions of plastic species are made only for the purpose of bestowing new names, and think of the determined "subspecies" as admittedly short, but still definite steps along the evolutionary highway, not only would the whole science of ornithology be benefited by a new interest, but we would be spared much of the ranting about "hair splitting", in which well-meaning but misguided souls indulge from time to time. What constitutes a subspecies is just now a difficult question to answer. A composite opinion gained by personal conversation, and by perusal of current literature can be best expressed by, "Why is a hen?" Some would use only a binomial for every recognizable form, others want to reduce to subspecific status all species bearing close resemblances to one another, and still others champion two kinds of subspecies! Obviously, the adoption of any of these extremes would work much harm, if for no other reason than that the true genetic relationships between most forms would not properly be expressed by the terms employed.

Most conservative ornithologists advocate a middle course and believe that intergradation should be actually proven before reducing any form to subspecific status. But, what sort of intergradation? If we take into consideration all angles of the problem, what can we possibly accept save that of geographic continuity,—an actual *blood* relationship? To designate as varieties geographically isolated forms which have been completely segregated for thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of years from similar organisms found in another area (or even on another continent!) simply because overlapping characters are shown by a few individuals is *not* telling the true story of conditions which now exist. True, there was undoubtedly one common ancestor; but so, for example, was there for all the grebes, or for all the gulls. If intergradation of all present-day species of grebes, or between any two of them were to be established through fossil remains—and this is not an impossible hypothesis—then, to be consistent, we should have now to regard them as subspecies! Intergradation through individual variation is inviting too many chances for error. As Grinnell (*Auk*, vol. 37, 1921, p. 469) has pointed out, what as-

surance is there that young or subadults or even "sports" may not be used in attempting to prove the point?

The criteria of isolation for the use of the binomial and of actual blood fusion for use of the trinomial will, I believe, prove the ultimate ones to be adopted not only because they permit of more accuracy in allocation, but also because of the uniformity possible under their use.

Yours very truly,

A. J. VAN ROSSEM,

*Pasadena, California, July 14, 1922.*

#### LIFE HISTORIES OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS

The Editor of *The Condor*:

Realizing that no one man can know all there is to know about all the birds and that the completeness of the Life Histories of North American Birds depends on the co-operation which the author receives from others, I wish to make this report of progress and appeal to your readers for contributions, trusting that you will find the space to publish it at an early date.

Two volumes have been published and the third, containing the Petrels and Pelicans and their allies, is printed and should soon be out. The manuscript for the fourth volume, containing the Ducks, up to and including the Ring-necked Duck, is now in Washington in finished form and ready for publication. It is not too late to add to this, when I correct the galley proof, any notes of importance on habits or distribution, and not too late to substitute any particularly fine photographs for those that I have already selected.

I am now at work on the fifth volume, which will contain the remainder of the Ducks and the Geese and Swans. I expect to finish this during the winter and send it to the publishers in the spring. The life histories are practically all written, subject to revision, but the photographs have not been selected.

I have no notes on the courtship of the American and White-winged Scoters or of any of the Geese, except the Canada, or on any of the Swans or Tree Ducks. I have no nesting photographs of Harlequin Duck, Barrow Golden-eye, any Geese except White-fronted and Canada, any Swans, or any Tree Ducks. I should be glad to receive contributions of notes or photographs to fill in any of these gaps. Or I should be glad to correspond with anyone who has anything else to offer. I am, of course,